

“What if the Church were really a Mother?”

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There were fundamentally two intentions of the Council at the moment of the writing of the eighth chapter of *Lumen Gentium*: bringing Mary back within the Church and making the Church more similar to Mary. After more than fifty years of distance, we can say that the first resolution is fully realised, but there is still much to do for the second. I would like to suggest some reflections to help Christian people to favour the Church’s resemblance to Mary, that means also open new spaces to a fuller collaboration in the Church among women, laity, and ordained ministers.

1. Mary’s experience: discipleship, discernment, accompaniment

As a woman, Mary participates in the vocation common to every woman: she is created to help others open up to relationships through words. In her womb, that is a theological place, the creative power of God is manifested through the incarnation of the Son. As Mother of God, Mary realises her own femininity in a way that is both unique and exemplary for individual believers and for the Church seen as a whole. That’s why I’m going to point out in particular her discipleship, discernment, and accompaniment.

1.1 Discipleship

Luke’s Gospel presents Mary as the exemplary disciple of the Lord. Becoming a mother means learning to follow: to follow the other, as one follows a trail, to accompany him in discovering and realising his mission in the world. In her interaction with the angel, Mary shows that she is capable of expressing herself, to let herself be questioned and to question without any timidity. We find the same confidence and openness again later in the episode where Jesus is found in the Temple and at the wedding at Cana. Mary is not afraid of confrontation, or of being exposed, even when this can lead to suffering or a lack of understanding. We see a similar approach in Jesus during his public ministry, in his ability to question, listen, and to let himself be interrogated by those whom he encounters, and in his ability to accept the revelation that the other makes of themselves and their feelings, also when the conversation is laced with strong emotions.

1.2 Discernment

Mary’s discipleship is also characterised by a particular attitude of discernment. The evangelist Luke explicitly emphasises this when he highlights how Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart (Luke 2:19.51). Through this particular characterisation of the Blessed Virgin, Luke directly reconnects her with the great wisdom tradition of Israel, that she was able to treasure: she learned to compare the word spoken by God through the law given to Moses, the oracles pronounced by the prophets, and the more common events of daily life. The fruit of this delicate work consists in the capacity

to accept and interpret the living word that God directs to her in the present moment. Anyway, the capacity of discernment will not exempt her from struggles or sufferings. Simeon's prophecy at the moment of the presentation of Jesus in the Temple puts her on guard: who is "full of grace", will see moments of contradiction and trial. Learning to assume the contradictions and trails of the reality that we are and live, and learning to interpret them in the light of the merciful goodness of God and of his promise to be always at our side, is a fundamental part of discernment.

1.3 Accompaniment

Mary's discipleship, progressively becomes an accompaniment. She is fully aware that her son is a gift that does not belong to her: she was entrusted only to take care of him and make him grow until he begins his public ministry. She accompanies him promptly, but never comes between Him and his Father. Mary's virginity, in fact, does not only concern her relationship with Joseph. Virgin and Mother, in other words, means that Mary loves her son with every fibre of her being, but with a love that is not possessive. At Cana, Mary knows when it is right to intervene and when it is time to retire and take a step back. She helps Jesus to manifest himself before his disciples, who begin to believe in Him. Then she withdraws from the scene to return to make her presence only at the decisive moment, at the foot of the cross. Jesus too, in his accompaniment of his disciples, knows the moment to make himself present and the moment to withdraw and leave them alone. After the resurrection, he helps them discern the action of God and does not fear exposing them to persecution and death. He encourages them to surpass him, carrying out even greater wonders. How can we not think that, at least in part, He had learned this style of accompaniment from Mary?

2. For a church that resembles Mary

2.1 The primacy of the baptismal priesthood

If the discipleship of Mary is the model of Christian discipleship, it means that all believers, irrespective of the state of one's life, must have her traits in common. To let the Church be more similar to Mary, in other words, all her members, men and women, consecrated and lay, must become increasingly aware of the dignity conferred to them at Baptism. In fact, as the "yes" of Mary precede the "yes" of the apostles, the gift of baptismal priesthood precedes the gift of the ordained priesthood. And that's true for at least two reasons: first of all, because no one can be ordained a priest without first being baptised. In second place, because ordained ministry is a gift that is given to some for the service and flourish fully of the entire ecclesial community. Couldn't the roots of so-called clericalism exist in a certain forgetfulness of this primacy that is founded and established in the dignity of all believers?

2.2 The emphasis on personal discipleship and discernment

If Mary, as the model disciple, lives her discipleship by consciously cultivating the art of personal discernment, a more Marian Church should ensure that pastoral action, education in faith, and religious formation on all levels and in all states of life should be configured more and more as the accompaniment

of personal discipleship and an introduction to the capacity for discernment. The call of God, in fact, is always singular: he entrusts a particular vocation to each of his children, as part of the unique mission of evangelisation entrusted by the Risen Lord to his brothers. Discernment is a baptismal gift meant for all believers. But, like all gifts, the gift of discernment must also be exercised to grow and bear fruit. Neither simply being a priest or merely belonging to an ecclesial institution can absolve the individual believer of his or her personal struggle of discipleship and the daily discernment of the signs of God's passage through one's own life.

2.3 Ministry, service, care

Traditionally, Christian ministry has been interpreted as service. In recent years, we have started to speak of care as well: if the term 'service' reminds us of the image of working for a boss, the term "care" reminds us instead of the image of the attention a mother gives to her child. Simplifying the topic a little, we could say that service is associated with a more masculine image, care to a more feminine one. Any ministry, any service, and any action of care implies a dimension of power. Power, in fact, is the possibility to realise one's own freedom in relationship with the rest of creation, and it is a gift of God as such. We cannot even imagine the vertigo of power experienced by Mary when she held the Son of God, completely dependent on her attention. Virginité, as regards the relationship of Mary with the Son, expresses her freedom as concerns the power entrusted to her, which allows her to serve the Son without using Him.

In his gestures at the last supper, Jesus wisely unites the image of service and that of care. The gesture of breaking the bread is the gesture through which the head of the family expresses his dedication to his wife and children in Hebrew culture. Through his work, he procures the bread that his loved ones need to grow. To the paternal gesture, however, Jesus adds an expression that only a mother would be able to pronounce in all truth: "This is my body". The maternal body is the only body we are literally nourished by. And without this nourishment there would be no possibility of life for us. The washing of the feet was the gesture of the mother and of the wife, in families that did not have servants, as was probably the case of the family in Nazareth. We can imagine, how many times and with what tenderness, without carrying the weight of any humiliation, Mary would have washed the feet of Jesus! "If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them" (John 13:17).